



POLICY BRIEF

The Time for Action: The African Union Must Resolve the Somaliland–Somalia Dispute

September 2025

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Laasgeel Institute for Policy Studies and Research Analysis (LIPS) is an independent think tank that promotes good governance, democratic institutions, and advocates for Somaliland's recognition through research, policy analysis, and strategic advocacy aimed at informing Somaliland's decision-makers.



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1. Summary

This policy brief urges the African Union to resolve the long-standing dispute between Somaliland and Somalia. It asserts that Somaliland's case is not an act of secession but a lawful reclamation of its previous statehood, grounded in the principle of state continuity. The State of Somaliland and Italian Somalia never established a ratified union, rendering the union legally invalid. On this basis, Somaliland rightfully regained its sovereignty in 1991.

The brief highlights the findings of the African Union's 2005 fact-finding mission, which acknowledged the uniqueness of Somaliland's case. It further emphasizes Somalia's ongoing aggression and the significant challenges that the absence of international recognition poses for Somaliland. This lack of recognition continues to obstruct Somaliland's political engagement and economic development, undermining the stability of the region.

Ultimately, the brief offers practical recommendations for the new leadership of the African Union. These include initiating legal arbitration to address the dispute, considering Somaliland's diplomatic recognition, and providing support for its democratic institutions. Such measures would not only affirm justice but also contribute to long-term peace, security, and stability in the Horn of Africa.

2. Overview context

The long-standing dispute between the Republic of Somaliland and Italian Somalia remains a major obstacle to peace and stability in the Horn of Africa. Despite Somaliland's restoration of its statehood in 1991 and its prior de jure independence from Britain on June 26, 1960, the African Union (AU) has yet to take decisive steps toward resolving this issue.

Somalia's continued territorial claims, backed by political and military support to clan militias operating within Somaliland's internationally demarcated borders, pose a serious threat to regional security, violate Somaliland's sovereignty, and undermine the AU's founding principles.

The borders of Somaliland were established and confirmed during its declaration of independence on June 26, 1960, based on historical treaties, such as the Anglo-French Agreement of 1888, the Anglo-Italian Protocol of 1894, the Anglo-Ethiopian Treaty of 1897, and the demarcation along the southern coast of the Gulf of Aden.

In terms of recognition, in 2005, the African Union sent a fact-finding mission to Somaliland led by Vice Chairman Patrick Matzikama, including top professionals from all departments of the African Union. The mission concluded its study by stating "the union between Somaliland and Somalia was never ratified" and noted malfunctions when it was put into action from 1960 to 1991. These factors make Somaliland's quest for recognition historically unique and self-justified in African political history. Therefore, recognizing Somaliland would not violate the African Union Charter, as its borders are based on the Uti Possidetis Juris principle, and the African Union Organization endorses the Cairo Resolution of 1964.

Currently, Somalia has escalated its aggression by violating the sovereignty of the Republic of Somaliland. It actively created a proxy clan militia, based in Las Anod, a city that lies within Somaliland's recognized borders. Moreover, Somalia has formally recognized these militias and laid claim to large parts of Somaliland's territory, including the regions of Sool, Sanaag, and parts of Togdheer. Such actions will only fuel further instability in an already volatile region.

Nevertheless, Somaliland's continued lack of international recognition has led to political marginalization, economic isolation, and exclusion from global financial institutions. Despite its impressive record in democratic governance, peacebuilding, and institutional development.

The new leadership of the African Union must urgently start a formal resolution process. This should include legal arbitration at the International Court of Justice, diplomatic recognition based on colonial-era borders, and strong support for Somaliland's democratic achievements. Recognizing Somaliland is not only legally justified — it is also vital for securing long-term stability, justice, and peace in the Horn and across the entire continent.

3. Somaliland's Political and Economic Struggles Due to Lack of Recognition

Since reclaiming its statehood in 1991, Somaliland has built a functioning democratic government with multiple peaceful transitions of power. Unlike Somalia, which continues to struggle with political instability, terrorism, piracy, and non-self-government, Somaliland has maintained peace, rule of law, human rights, freedom of speech, and a one-person, one-vote electoral system—an achievement in a region plagued by chaos and dictatorship.

However, Somaliland's lack of international recognition has hindered its economic growth and access to African development Banks and global financial institutions. Without official recognition, it faces difficulties in securing foreign investment, international aid, and economic partnerships, limiting its development and economic potential.

4. Somaliland's Historical and Legal Claim to Sovereignty

3.1 De Jure Independence (1960): Somaliland obtained full independence from Britain on June 26, 1960, and never legally transferred its sovereignty to another state.

3.2 Unratified Union: The 1960 Union Act was never ratified by Somaliland, and Somalia unilaterally implemented a version of it in 1961, violating international legal norms.

3.3 Public Rejection: In the June 1961 constitutional referendum, 60% of Somalilanders voted against Somalia's constitution, showing clear opposition to the union (Walls, 2009).

3.4 Failed Military Coup: In December 1961, Somaliland military officers attempted to reclaim independence. A Somali court dismissed their charges, citing the absence of a legal union (Bradbury, 2008).

3.5 African Union Recognition: The 2005 AU fact-finding mission concluded that the union between Somaliland and Somalia was never legally binding and that Somaliland's claim to statehood is legitimate (African Union, 2005).

3.6 Genocide and Human Rights Violations: The Siad Barre regime committed genocide against Somalilanders, particularly the Isaaq clan, in the late 1980s, leading to mass killings and displacement (Amnesty International, 1990).

3.7 Constitutional Referendum (2001): In 2001, Somaliland held a constitutional referendum in which more than 97% of voters supported independence. This solidified Somaliland's legal and democratic foundation for statehood (Bradbury, 2008; Walls, 2009).

5. A Unique Case, not a Pandora's Box

Somaliland's case is unique and does not set a precedent for secessionist movements in Africa, since the Republic of Somaliland is not seeking to break away from Italian Somalia, but rather to reclaim its pre-existing statehood based on colonial-era borders. The State of Somaliland, which gained independence on June 26, 1960, never ceased to exist; instead, it was occupied. Its sovereignty was reactivated in 1991, following the restoration of the state in line with the principle of state continuity. This aligns with the AU's 1964 principles on the principle of territorial integrity. If any territory in the world has a legal and historical foundation for statehood, it is Somaliland. The AU must now make a final and binding decision on the question of Somaliland's status.

6. Policy Recommendations to the African Union

- 1. Legal Resolution:** The African Union should initiate a legal case concerning Somaliland's statehood at the International Court of Justice, as the African Union officially acknowledged Somaliland's case in 2005.
- 2. Diplomatic Recognition:** The AU should grant diplomatic recognition to the Republic of Somaliland based on its colonial-era borders and the principle of state continuity.
- 3. Alignment with AU Principles:** Recognizing Somaliland aligns with the AU's constitutional principles and reinforces the Union's commitment to justice, self-determination, and respect for historical borders.
- 4. Democracy Protection:** The AU must support and protect Somaliland's robust democratic governance, which serves as a positive model for other African nations.

5. Regional Stability: Official recognition of Somaliland would promote regional stability and help prevent further conflict, as Somalia's ongoing territorial claims over Somaliland have fueled instability and violence.

7. Conclusion

The newly elected African Union (AU) leadership must take decisive action to arbitrate and resolve the long-standing dispute between Somaliland and Somalia. The AU has a responsibility to uphold peace, justice, and the rule of law across the continent. Somaliland's legal case for recognition is undeniable, grounded in historical legitimacy and the principle of state continuity. It is time for the AU to make a final and binding decision on Somaliland's status. Recognizing Somaliland is not only legally justified but also essential for promoting stability, democratic governance, and long-term peace in the Horn of Africa.

8. Reference

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About Laasgeel Institute

Laasgeel Institute for Policy Studies and Research Analysis (LIPS) is an independent, non-partisan think tank based in Hargeisa, Somaliland. It conducts research and policy analysis on governance, democratization, peace, security, and Somaliland's recognition, providing practical recommendations to promote stability in the Horn of Africa.

